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DEPARTMENT PASS TO AID/OTI (RPORTER)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/30/2028

TAGS: PREL PGOV VE CO

SUBJECT: CHAVEZ SUPPORTERS ERECT STATUE OF FARC LEADER

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ
FOR REASON 1.4 (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. Radical Chavistas unveiled a bust of Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) founder Manuel Marulanda in an poor eastern Caracas neighborhood on September 26. The Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV) was the principal force behind the public ceremony honoring Marulanda, although prominent supporters of President Chavez, including Libertador Borough Mayor Freddy Bernal, also attended. The Colombian Embassy publicly protested the unveiling. Although the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (BRV) has not openly endorsed the Marulanda statue, it is a visible reminder that the BRV continues to support the FARC.
End Summary.

Honoring Marulanda

¶2. (SBU) Ardent Chavistas unveiled a bronze bust of the deceased founder of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), Manuel Marulanda, in a public September 26 ceremony in the Caracas working class "23rd of January" neighborhood. The event was principally organized by the Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV). The inscription on Marulanda's bust reads "Insurgent Hero of Bolivarian Colombia". Attendees congregated in a recently constructed square and sang songs and chanted slogans before a large media contingent. Participants also hailed Maracaibo Mayor Gian Carlo Di Martino's candidacy for the governorship of Zulia State.

¶3. (SBU) Although the Venezuelan government did not officially endorse the event, supporters closely aligned with Hugo Chavez's United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) attended. For example, Freddy Bernal, mayor of the Libertador Borough of Caracas, was on hand, but told reporters "I am here as a revolutionary, not as a mayor." As fireworks were set off to conclude the ceremony, attendees chanted "Long live Marulanda", "Long live the FARC", and President Chavez's mantra, "Fatherland, Socialism or Death, We Will Prevail!" Chavez did not make an appearance or make reference to the event in his recent public statements.

¶4. (SBU) Colombian diplomats in Caracas have formally requested that the Colombian flag be removed from the Caracas square displaying Marulanda's bust. Additionally, the Colombian Embassy has disseminated the Colombian Government's statement condemning any type of support or tributes to Manuel Marulanda and urging the international community to take the same position.

Comment

¶5. (C) After urging the international community to consider the FARC as legal "belligerents," Chavez changed his public line 180 degrees in the wake of Ingrid Betancourt's rescue and FARC military defeats. In June, Chavez urged the FARC to exchange its "military struggle" for a political one. Since then, Chavez has avoided expressing open support for the FARC, a group that remains generally unpopular in Venezuela outside of Chavez's most ideological supporters. The BRV, however, has not taken substantial actions against FARC members operating in its territory. Although the BRV did not openly support the Marulanda statue unveiling, the event is symbolic of the continued ties between the BRV and FARC.

CAULFIELD